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SUBJECT: USG DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES IN CHITTAGONG HILL
TRACTS TO ADDRESS SIMMERING ETHNIC TENSIONS

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Political and civil society leaders in the strategic Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) described to Ambassador Moriarty simmering ethnic tensions that continued to plague the region. Land disputes remain the main area of contention between local tribal groups and Bengali settlers. The campaign for the December 29 Parliament elections could further polarize the communities given the disparate views of local leaders of the major parties. In inaugurating the first development project fully funded by USAID in the region, the Ambassador strongly signaled the U.S. Government's desire to help mitigate underlying local problems that fuel the ethnic tension. Stability in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is important to ensure terrorists from neighboring India and Burma do not use the region as a safe haven.

USG LAUNCHES INAUGURAL PROGRAM IN THE CHT

¶2. (SBU) On November 18, Ambassador Moriarty launched the Integrated Protected Area Co-management project, the first U.S. Government program in the region since Bangladesh independence in 1971. This program, with a total value of USD 13 million, will focus on sustainable natural resource management and biodiversity conservation, while promoting equitable economic growth and environmental governance. These development issues are at the heart of the land disputes between indigenous tribes and Bengalis who have moved to the Hill Tracts from elsewhere in overpopulated Bangladesh.

A LONG HISTORY OF LAND RIGHTS DISPUTES

¶3. (U) The Chittagong Hill Tracts comprise an area of 13,180 square kilometers in southeastern Bangladesh and borders India and Myanmar. About half the region's 1.5 million people belong to indigenous ethnic groups that mainly follow Theravada Buddhism. Bengali Muslims account for most of the rest of the population. Many of the Bengalis arrived from densely populated regions of Bangladesh as part of a massive government resettlement drive in the 1970s and 1980s. The state gave the settlers title to local land, leading to a resistance movement led by the Shanti Bahini guerilla

force. The Government deployed more than 80,000 security personnel during the 1970s, turning the region into a militarized zone. The military presence remains strong.

14. (U) The Government of Bangladesh and tribal communities signed a Peace Accord in 1997 but it still has not been fully implemented. The Accord stipulated the transfer of all government offices to minority-led District Councils, but the critical Forest Department and the Bangladesh Fisheries Development Corporation offices are among several remaining outside the councils' control. The government still appoints members of Regional Councils and District Councils, although the Accord calls for their election. Additionally, a Land Commission established in 2001 to determine ownership of CHT land has yet to be formed.

15. (U) Another land issue stems from the migration of indigenous communities to remote Hill Tracts areas in fear of attacks by Bengali settlers. Many tribal groups have moved into reserve forests and other protected areas, where they live under constant threat of eviction by the Forest Department. Illegal logging by the military, traders, government officials and Bengali settlers also have pushed indigenous farmers deeper into the countryside and even into neighboring countries. The degradation of the rain forest poses a clear threat to the itinerant hillside cultivation practiced for generations by the indigenous population.

DHAKA 00001254 002 OF 002

16. (SBU) During his visits to indigenous communities, Ambassador Moriarty heard several accounts of Bengali settlers grabbing land farmed by tribesmen. Cultivable land is scarce in the hilltops, and tribal villagers with titles to their land recounted how Bengali settlers showed up with documents claiming ownership. Villagers acknowledged that in a number of recent cases, judgments have gone in favor of the indigenous population when the disputes were brought to court.

NATIONAL ELECTIONS COULD EXACERBATE LOCAL TENSION

17. (SBU) The stark political differences in the Hill Tracts were on display during a November 19 dinner among the Ambassador and local leaders of the country's two major parties, the Awami League, and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP). Rangamati District BNP President Zahir Ahmed, a Bengali Muslim, supported equal access to local land and government positions for settlers. Dipankar Talukdar, a former Member of Parliament for the Awami League who is from a local tribe, advocated equal rights with protection of minorities. He acknowledged that his relatively moderate views were unpopular among indigenous people. Both politicians displayed considerable anger and resentment at how unfairly their supporters were being treated by the other side. Nurul Alam Siddique, representing the Jama'at party was also present at the dinner but he was silent for most of the discussion.

18. (SBU) Ethnic tension could increase should campaigning further polarize the Bengali and indigenous populations before the December 29 Parliament elections. Among those preaching calm is Sadhanananda Mohathera, popularly called the Bono Bhante. The wizened 88-year-old is revered by all people of the Hill Tracts regardless of their religious faith. He preaches the Buddhist philosophy of non-violence and is an important stabilizing force in the region. He told the Ambassador that the

indigenous people of the Hills had to figure out a way to live with the Bengalis: Qwe have no choice.

COMMENT: U.S. PRESENCE CAN HELP THE CHT

19. (SBU) The Chittagong Hill Tracts is a land in conflict. The divide among Bengali settlers and tribal hill-people can easily flare given the region's extreme poverty and disparate views over fundamental rights and access to land. The new USG presence through USAID-funded development activity should help tribal communities bring about long-lasting change that will strengthen their fragile livelihoods. Embassy personnel will make regular trips to the Chittagong Hill Tracts to monitor the new development work and to encourage all sides to settle differences peaceably and through respectful negotiations. Creating a more stable environment will discourage both domestic and international terrorists from using the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a safe haven.

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